

JumpCut

By George T. Marshall

October 2007. As we mark the 6th Anniversary of the events of September 11, 2001 it gives one pause to look back at some of the seminal moments in American history that served to unite the entire country.

Depending on your generation, that could have been the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the end of World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald on live television, or the resignation debacle of President Richard Nixon. For me, it was the landing of man on the moon and stepping outside to walk on the surface; an event that saw not only the nation, but the entire globe transfixed to their television sets.

Most of the events I cited above drew from rather negative experiences. Not the moon landing. For my generation, this was an event that was a source of pride. It was a statement about man's innate potential. To see a human being, walking on the surface of the moon—not the earth—reinforced that anything was possible with imagination, courage and vision. It spoke volumes about man's ultimate potential and for one brief moment, we went outside provincial political boundaries and xenophobic perceptions that separate one nation from another. Our science fiction had become real and the utopian visions of a "Star Trek" were no longer restricted to the realm of fiction.

Of course, in the 1960s, reaching the moon was not only about science but politics — there was a space race between the United States and the Soviet Union, which the U.S. won when Neil Armstrong walked the moon on July 20, 1969.

Today, while the world has evolved, one could argue whether its politics have really changed. America has taken on a new international identity and space exploration has not been at the forefront of the political agenda. Occasionally we'll hear something about NASA, a space station, the shuttle and international cooperation, but it quickly gets drowned out by news on the conflict in Iraq, political jockeying for the next election, or how many times a Paris Hilton or Brittany Spears is jailed or enters rehab.

Isn't it amazing how easily we get distracted by such empty, vacuous celebrity.

Twelve Americans left their footprints on the lunar surface during six landings from 1969 to 1972. Three — Alan Shepard, Pete Conrad and James Irwin — have died.

While they would be loathe to label themselves heroes, these men touched the American zeitgeist in ways that impact us even today. What made them so special? What promise did they hold out for a generation mired in one war after another since 1941? What could the current generation learn from what they achieved?

Enter film director, Jeffrey Roth who has set out to answer these questions with his new documentary, "The Wonder of It All."

Some Background

Jeff Roth attended California State University Northridge where he earned his Bachelor of Arts with an emphasis in film production. He started working on television movies as an intern in the camera department and from there worked his way up to become a camera assistant on TV sitcoms.

According to Jeff: "I wanted to learn how the set worked, so I thought that being in the camera department would at least allow me to stay on the set.

"My dream has always been to tell a story that I believed in.

"From the time that I was 10 years old, I would go to Universal Studios and sit on the tram and dream about being a Director. When the idea for this project came up, I was thrilled to have the chance to tell the story of the remarkable men who became moonwalkers. This is a humanistic story that I feel needs to be told."

"The Wonder of It All" recounts the narrative of the journeys of the 12 men who walked on the moon—from childhood to the present. Each astronaut talks candidly about his adventure. What makes this truly amazing is that until this film, there has been no personal account of how these historical missions affected each man as human beings.

This film took 2 years to make. From the beginning, the goal was to make a humanistic story that allowed these remarkable men to talk about their lives and explore how walking on the moon affected each one personally.

Roth and his team were able to conduct in depth interviews with 7 of the men that made these journeys. From this, they ended up with over 12 hours of footage that then had to be painstakingly narrowed down to 90 minutes.

What viewers will see are men who have not only gazed into space, but have looked into their own souls. Since the producers were able to develop trust and a strong rapport with the astronauts, some remarkable revelations surfaced.

As the cameras ran through narrative pauses, the interviewees spontaneously blurted out thoughts they may never have spoken before as illustrated by Aldrin's deeply personal description of the impact on him, prior to Apollo 11, of his mother's unexpected suicide.

"We've long since taken off the silver suit and helmet," said Eugene Cernan of Houston, the last man to walk the moon on Apollo 17. "We're no longer invincible — we're grandfathers. We've mellowed and gotten nostalgic."

Other moonwalkers interviewed were Apollo 12's Alan Bean and Apollo 16's John Young, both of Houston; Apollo 16's Charles Duke Jr. of New Braunfels; Apollo 11's Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin; Apollo 14's Edgar Mitchell of Lake Worth, Fla.; and Apollo 17's Harrison Schmitt of Albuquerque, N.M.

It turns out that Jeff Roth, 37, has been a space buff for most of his life.

"Think about it: Wouldn't it be cool if you could watch a documentary on Christopher Columbus where he's interviewed? Well, we had that chance with the moonwalkers."

"There were only 12 moonwalkers. If there had been 100, you wouldn't have the same mystique. But these are the guys — the men who walked the moon. Nine are still here, and it's time we gave them a listen."

Time indeed.

When I spoke with Jeff recently we discussed making the film and I learned more about what made him tick as well.

Our interview went like this:

GTM: Tell us a bit about yourself: your academic and professional background. Just who is Jeffrey Roth?

Jeffrey Roth: I went to film school at California State University Northridge where I earned my BA. My parents died during my freshman year and that put my career on hold. I tried to do everything that I could to stay in school, but that was not easy and extended my term to 6 years. During that time I longed to be with a family again and I met my wife Cindy. Trying to launch a film career and support my family was not easy, so I tried different jobs on film sets from PA to the sound and camera departments. I enjoyed being a camera assistant as it kept me on the set so I could learn. Since my kids were born, I was fortunate enough to work on TV sitcoms, which allowed me to have a life and still make a living. But I never gave up my dream of being a filmmaker.

GTM: Why did you decide to produce a documentary on American astronauts? What is it about their lives that you found a source of inspiration?

Jeffrey Roth: I decided to do a documentary on American astronauts because I realized the need to tell the story. While there are a lot of movies already about the space race, the stories of the individual astronauts have never been told. Especially the human side. Who are they?

Most people cannot name three of the twelve men who have walked on the moon, despite the fact that these men have performed feats of incomparable

merit. These men, all in their seventies now, have such a unique place in world events that I wanted to document their lives before we lose them to history.

GTM: How did you go about deciding how you wanted to shoot this documentary and what footage you wanted to obtain?

Jeffrey Roth: I wanted to shoot this documentary by making it personal. I want the viewer to feel like they are sitting in a room with these extraordinary guys listening to their stories. There is only a limited amount of NASA Apollo footage and most of it has been shown over and over again through the years in earlier projects. I decided early in the making of my film to only use NASA footage to illustrate the points made by the astronauts while they were speaking, and not use the footage to tell the main story. The narrative in my film is provided by the astronauts themselves. This fact differentiates my film from the many other films about the moon landings.

GTM: Tell us about your timeline for the evolution of this work.

Jeffrey Roth: I was inspired to make this film in mid-2004 during a casual conversation with a friend. During the conversation we discussed the fact that men who had walked on the moon were now living in obscurity. This thought fascinated me. Later, the idea of doing a film about them gained momentum and I decided to ask the astronauts to participate. At first only a few agreed, but with persistence, I finally was able to convince seven of the remaining nine moonwalkers to join the project.

My first interview was with Charlie Duke. In hindsight, it was considerably fortunate that he was the first of the astronauts because we were all nervous and he made us feel comfortable. Later came Alan Bean, John Young, Edgar Mitchell, Buzz Aldrin, Gene Cernan, then Harrison Schmitt. I can remember that we were happiest to get John Young on film, because he declined our interviews several times, then changed his mind after his retirement from NASA.

I regret that Dave Scott and Neil Armstrong declined to participate. Dave Scott decided to do a competing project, and Neil Armstrong is reluctant to give interviews. We are still amenable to including them on film in case they change their minds!

GTM: How was this production funded?

Jeffrey Roth: We are very proud of the fact that we were self-funded. This gave us more control over the project and enabled us to create the kind of film we envisioned. You will only see our vision on the screen

GTM: What has it been like touring the Festival circuit? Can you tell us about some of your experiences?

Jeffrey Roth: There is no greater joy to me than seeing a film that I conceived being shown in front of an audience. I love to watch the reactions in the crowd. The film festivals have allowed me to experience that.

The most satisfying experience to me has been the fact that several of the moonwalkers have accompanied me to showings at the film festivals. I have really enjoyed spending more time with them in this way.

GTM: What did you learn that you didn't know about the individuals who were involved with the American space program and how has that impacted on you?

Jeffrey Roth: To me, the most striking and surprising thing that I learned about the astronauts was how truly dedicated to their work they were. These guys were not worried about fame or fortune, they were concerned mainly about the tasks ahead of them and how best to do their jobs. As they were walking on the moon they weren't marveling at their surroundings, they were working hard to accomplish the many tasks assigned to them. I didn't have a full appreciation of that fact before I made the film.

GTM: If you were to do this over again, what would you do differently?

Jeffrey Roth: I am very happy with the final result of my film, so that is a difficult question to answer. Having said that, there are always more questions to ask the astronauts, and more ways we can tweak the film by editing it or making another program.

GTM: What would you like to see happen this work?

Jeffrey Roth: In my view, the main purpose in making this film has been accomplished. I have placed the words and thoughts of seven outstanding humans in a sort of time-capsule that will survive us all. My only hope is that our film will have a wide distribution, so that others can also learn about these men.

GTM: You have a rather famous relative in the film business who early on established some of the boundaries that are defined as what makes up an independent filmmaker. How has that shaped you if at all?

Jeffrey Roth: Having watched Bobby Roth, my Uncle, make independent films for years now, I could see that you did not need the support of a studio to make your project. Having seen the success of his films, I was convinced that I could do the same. The fact is, you need to have a compelling story and characters. It makes no difference if you spend \$50,000 or \$50 million dollars. You can go the theatres and see high budget films that will be forgotten about within a year or so.

GTM: Has this documentary inspired you to do another project? If so what would that be?

Jeffrey Roth: There are millions of stories to tell. We have been able to document seven of them with this film. I have been inspired by this process to continue that work.

During the past few months many astronauts who didn't go to the moon but still have led interesting lives have approached me to document their stories as well. I am currently thinking about appropriate ways to document their biographies through film. I don't want to become only an "astronaut filmmaker" but I am struck by the richness of the material that is being presented to me. Perhaps I'll do one more astronaut-related project before moving on to other subjects.

GTM: What would you tell a film student at a college about approaching a career path in this discipline?

Jeffrey Roth: If this is your passion, then you need to stick with it. For a select few, it will be easy. But for most, it will not. That does not mean you should be discouraged. There are many stories to be told and ways to tell them. With all the new technology out there, it is easier than ever to make an independent film.

GTM: Is there anything else you'd like to add for our readers?

Jeffrey Roth: I would like to add my thanks to the people of the Rhode Island International Film Festival for the kindness and generosity shown to me over the past few months. They gave us the opportunity for our first New England screening.

To learn more about Jeffrey Roth and his film "The Wonder if it All" go to the website at < <http://www.thewonderofitallfilm.com>>

About the Author:

George T. Marshall is the Producing Director of the Rhode Island-based Flickers Arts Collaborative, the creators of the annual Rhode Island International Film Festival for which he also serves as Executive Director. He teaches documentary film and speech communications at Roger Williams University. He is a director, writer, producer of commercials and industrials for numerous business clients in the region. Currently he is writing a chapter on teaching digital documentary filmmaking for a new college text book entitled: "Teaching with Multimedia: Pedagogy in the Blog/Websphere." He can be reached at <flicksart@aol.com>